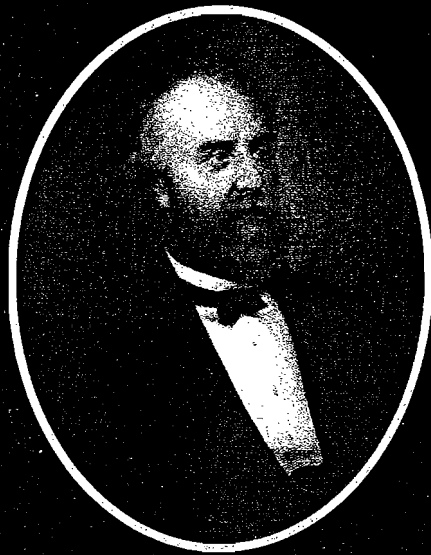


# Grand Masters of Massachusetts

by Rt. Wor. Walter Hunt

1869-1871



Most Wor.  
**William Sewall  
Gardner**

*Holding the Scales  
in Equipoise*

*The tenth installment in the continuing series  
focused on our past  
Massachusetts Grand Masters.*

Of those who had been called to lead our Grand Lodge in the 18th and 19th centuries, the vast majority were from Boston or its environs. This is hardly a surprise; Massachusetts Freemasonry was born and was nurtured in the Bay State's largest city, and the Grand Lodge's meetings had always been held there, since the days of Henry Price. There were a few exceptions: Isaiah Thomas had been a printer in Boston, but made his reputation and his career in Worcester well before his installation as Grand Master; Timothy Bigelow, John Abbot, and Caleb Butler were all from the area of Groton, north and west of the metropolis. Charles C. Dame was from the North Shore.

In 1869, however, the Grand Lodge elected a Grand Master from a city, Lowell, that had not even existed half a century before. William Sewall Gardner was a young man—just 42 at the time of his elevation—but had already made his mark as a lawyer outside the fraternity, and within it, as a prominent member of Grand Lodge and of the several York Rite and Scottish Rite bodies. Youthful, energetic, and extremely well-spoken, he was held in high regard by his brethren. As Past Grand Master Samuel Crocker Lawrence said of him twenty years later,

We must gratefully pay him the tribute due to his high attainments, his indefatigable industry and unselfish devotion, in every department of Masonic duty which was entrusted to his hands. His trained and exact habits of mind and scholarly love of research admirably fitted him for the labors of a Masonic historian and expositor, and the contributions of his pen have done much to enlarge the field of Masonic information. He was deeply versed in the ritualism of the Craft . . . His interpretation of Masonry doubtless borrowed something from the natural seriousness of his character; but it was beautifully enforced by the kindness of his manners, the gentle dignity of his bearing, the purity of his life, and the unquestioned integrity of his heart.

William Sewall Gardner was born in Hallowell, Maine, in 1827; as his biographer notes, "he came of sound Puritan ancestry," a descendant on the maternal side from the Sewalls. As is true of the author of this article, he was a graduate of Bowdoin College in Brunswick, Maine; and like many young men of his time, sought his career in southern New England, entering a law practice with Theodore H. Sweetser in Lowell. In the previous quarter-century, it had grown from a mill town of 2,500 to a bustling, rapidly-expanding city of 33,000 (second largest in Massachusetts), primarily due to the booming textile industry.

There had been Masonry in the area since Paul Revere's time. He had signed the charter of Saint Paul Lodge in Groton, and his successor Samuel Dunn had granted one to Aurora Lodge, meeting in Fitchburg since 1844; Pentucket Lodge of Chelmsford, formed in 1807, had relocated to Lowell when its charter was restored in 1845. In 1852 a group of Masons from that lodge, including Jefferson Bancroft, Peter Lawson and Samuel Knox Hutchinson, received dispensation for a new lodge to help address the exceptional interest in the fraternity in Lowell. During its year under dispensation, Ancient York Lodge conferred the

degrees of Freemasonry on 25-year-old attorney William Sewall Gardner, who had just passed the Massachusetts Bar.

In 1854 he had already reached the office of senior deacon; in 1856 he was elected the lodge's fourth master, which chair he occupied for two years. His skill in Masonry and leadership in the Lowell fraternity, both Blue lodge and the York and Scottish Rites, attracted the attention of the Grand Lodge; Most Wor. John T. Heard, the young and dynamic Grand Master of Masons in Massachusetts, chose him as grand marshal—and there is considerable evidence that the well-traveled Brother Heard, who visited every lodge in the jurisdiction during his three years in office, was almost always introduced and escorted by Brother Gardner. Grand Masters Coolidge and Parkman appointed him as the district deputy grand master for the Third District in 1861–1863; he was elected as senior grand warden in 1864; and in December 1868 was chosen as Grand Master of Masons at the age of 41.

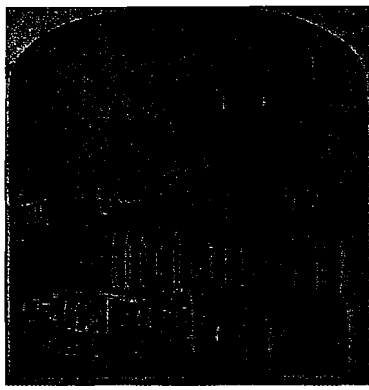
The task before him was daunting. Under his predecessor Charles C. Dame, the Grand Lodge had undertaken the task of replacing the Boston Masonic Temple destroyed by the Winthrop House fire of April 1864; it had been dedicated in impressive ceremony in June 1867. In Gardner's inaugural address to the Grand Lodge, he noted that Freemasonry in Massachusetts was enjoying a period of great prosperity

Men of all classes and conditions, in great numbers flock to our temples and gather about our altars. If brethren, members constitute the successful state of Masonry, then are we indeed fortunate. The number of lodges and of members was never before so large as at the present time, and the outward signs of prosperity were never more encouraging . . .

But the building of the new temple had imposed a huge burden of debt, nearly \$400,000, which required almost \$30,000 annually to service.

Before these liabilities accrued, the care of the Grand Lodge was comparatively light, and the duties of the executive officers few. Now the Grand Lodge has become a corporation, and its financial interests exceed all others . . . Thus Masonry which has carefully kept aloof from the influences and excitements of the world, has in a measure become mixed up with them. The Grand Lodge of Massachusetts has thus entered upon its new and untried experiment.

The care of the lodges, the preservation and perfection of the ritual, charity, which should be our great object, become subordinate to the greater duty of paying our debts and meeting our engagements.



In essence, he noted, the business concerns of the institution seemed to have become a greater concern than the ultimate reasons for its existence: to transmit the teachings and philosophy. But it should not be so: while the Grand Lodge—which, he indicated, was in essence all of the lodges in the Commonwealth—had to deal with the financial burdens, it was also the lodges'

responsibility to do the work of Masonry: effectively, accurately, and uniformly. It had not been that long since John T. Heard had traveled the state, witnessing the work.

During his Grand Mastership, William Sewall Gardner granted 28 charters: four in 1869, ten in 1870, and fourteen in 1871. Some were new lodges where one already existed (including Charlestown, Amesbury, South Boston, Worcester, Lawrence, and in Valparaiso, Chile); others broke new ground for Masonry (Belchertown, Yarmouth, Cotuit, Brookline, Wilbraham). This period of enormous growth reflected the sentiments he expressed in his first address to Grand Lodge and impressed upon him that the custody of the Grand Lodge was a heavy and important responsibility, requiring hard work and close attention.

At the end of his first year, he revised the requirements and duties of district deputy grand masters, requiring a report from them based on their inspection of each lodge's work, regalia, furniture, records, and activities—twenty requirements in all:

These are some of your duties; others of no less consequence, will impress themselves upon you . . . Avoid antagonism, impress upon the masters and wardens the necessity of their attendance upon the communications of the Grand Lodge, and that the destinies and control of the Grand Lodge are in their hands; and let the brethren understand that they have their representation through their chosen officers . . . as the representative of the Grand Lodge, it is your duty to encourage the zealous Mason, impart instruction where you can, cheer the lodges, and zealously labor, as a co-worker with your brethren, to elevate the moral standard of Masonry in the field assigned to you.

He was also more than willing to be firm and decisive with his authority. In a dispute in the fall of 1870 with Star in the East Lodge in New Bedford, which had refused to remit monies due the Grand Lodge, he moved at once to revoke their charter. It was restored in March after the dispute was resolved by payment being made, with interest and expenses added.

As a scholar, Grand Master Gardner also distinguished himself, most particularly in the last speech he gave as Grand Master in December 1871—what has

**Top: The Lowell Masonic block circa 1872 from a stereopticon slide. Below: The Lowell Masonic Building circa 1929.**



*(continued on page 32)*

come to be known as the "Henry Price Address." At the time he delivered it, the Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania had entered into a dispute regarding the seniority of its own body with respect to that of Massachusetts, a disagreement that has not completely subsided in the present day. Brother Gardner's Henry Price Address traces the early history of Freemasonry, provides a superb biography of Price and an account of his Grand Mastership, the provenance and validity of the Massachusetts Grand Charter, and the work of Price's successors in St. John's (Provincial) Grand Lodge of Massachusetts. Accompanied by pictures and a facsimile reproduction of Price's commission, it is the first great work of Masonic scholarship to appear in the Proceedings.

After serving as Grand Master, Brother Gardner returned to the practice of law, and was called to the bench in 1875 and ultimately to the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court in 1885; in the records of our Grand Lodge, he was usually referred to as Judge Gardner, and was often called upon to interpret cases of Masonic Law; as Grand Master he issued a lengthy ruling on the definition of a Masonic offense, and another important edict reinforcing the 1794 declaration of Grand Master John Cutler regarding territorial jurisdiction (in connection with the establishment of the Grand Lodge of Chile, in which country, Massachusetts had a chartered lodge since 1854). He was a frequent speaker at the Feast of St. John, offering remarks in 1875, 1876, 1880, 1881, 1882, and 1884.

In the fall of 1887 he fell ill; according to the memorial of Grand Master Hutchinson, it was due to "serious nervous prostration, the result of unremitted application to his professional labors." He was commended by Governor Ames for his hard work as a judge, and it was hoped that a trip through Europe would help him to recover; but in the first week of April 1888 he died, just over 60 years of age. His death, along with that of Grand Master Howland in 1887 and the subsequent loss of Grand Master Briggs partway through his first and only year in the Oriental Chair in 1893, constituted a difficult loss for the Grand Lodge; all of these men had been expected to dispense wise counsel in their older age, yet were struck down by the all-devouring scythe far before their time.

Grand Master Gardner's legacy continues to the present. He was a mentor for Grand Master Charles C. Hutchinson and Senior Grand Warden William Salmon, who served in the East of Ancient York Lodge after him; he was a charter member and the first master of Kilwinning Lodge, Lowell's third Masonic lodge; and in 1928 the Masonic community in Lowell honored him by giving his name to a new lodge—William Sewall Gardner Lodge—which merged with Kilwinning Lodge in 2007. Lowell has since given us many distinguished Masons, including Hutchinson and two other Grand Masters: Arthur D. Prince and Andrew G. Jenkins; but among the prominent Masons of Lowell, Gardner must be held among the foremost. He was a gifted, capable, and learned man who truly held the scales of justice in equipoise. ■